

Change in Korea-Japan Relations Unlikely Despite Abe Resignation

blog.keia.org/2020/09/change-korea-japan-relations-unlikely-despite-abe-resignation/

September 9, 2020



By Terrence Matsuo

At the end of August, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe announced his intention to resign because of a serious health condition. Experts say that while a new prime minister does present opportunities for resetting ties between Seoul and Tokyo, there is little evidence to suggest any significant changes in the overall dynamics of the bilateral relationship.

At a press conference on August 28, Prime Minister Abe announced that after a doctor visit during the summer, his ulcerative colitis had flared up again. The disease, which affects the gastrointestinal system of the body, is the same condition which ended his first run as leader of Japan in 2007. The prime minister said that while he was taking medication to manage the disease, treatment would likely take most of his attention.

“It would be unacceptable if I were to err in an important political decision, or fail to achieve results...while being sick and undergoing treatment,” said Prime Minister Abe, according to a transcript released by the Japanese government. “As I have become unable to confidently live up to the mandate from the people, I should not continue in the position of prime minister.”

After the announcement, the Yonhap news service cited a statement by Blue House Spokesman Kang Min-seok that said “we regret the sudden resignation announcement by Prime Minister Abe, who has long played many roles for the development of South Korea-Japan relations.” In addition to wishing his quick recovery, Yonhap said the Blue House hopes to work with the next Japanese leader.

In his press conference, Prime Minister Abe declined to name a specific individual he hoped would succeed him. The Kyodo news agency reported that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party of Japan will hold a meeting on September 14 to pick their new leader, with the National Diet convening the next day to elect the next prime minister. Although several prominent members of the LDP have announced their candidacy, the current chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga, has emerged as a front runner.

The South Korean government has been reticent about its expectations for the next Japanese prime minister. When asked about bilateral relations in light of Prime Minister Abe’s resignation announcement, *The Korea Herald* reported that Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-

wha told lawmakers on August 31 that “we have to take a cautious stance on casting a hopeful outlook, as the matter itself is difficult.”

With the breakdown in communication between President Moon and Prime Minister Abe, experts say South Korea is highly dependent on public signaling in thinking of how to move forward with Japan. “I think it’s probably going to be on the South Korean side a watching and waiting to see if Japan makes a move,” said Scott Snyder, a senior fellow for Korea studies at the Council on Foreign Affairs.

The installation of a new prime minister in Japan does present a limited opening to underline shared interest in a reset in bilateral relations. James Schoff, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said Japanese export restrictions on South Korea were one example. “If there’s some good faith effort on both sides to improve the transparency or confidence in the export controls process, that would be a kind of tangible improvement,” he said in a telephone interview.

On the other hand, Brad Glosserman, deputy director for the Center for Rule Making Strategies at Tama University in Japan, said that Japanese officials are looking for “some commitment to the partnership that cannot be revoked.” For example, if President Moon chose not to enforce the Korean Supreme Court’s decision ordering the liquidation of Nippon Steel’s assets, “Japan can probably come up with a solution...that won’t be a hundred percent consistent with what South Korea wants, but will go a hell of a lot further than where we are right now,” he said.

But experts are pessimistic that either Seoul or Tokyo will take advantage of the chance to change the trajectory of bilateral relations. “There have been countless opportunities in the past,” said Dr. Sayuri Romei, a public policy fellow at the Wilson Center. “And the Japanese government and the South Korean government never really took advantage of them.”

“Both countries have expressed ‘fatigue’ about the other, being tired of being doomed to suffer the endless cycle of provocations and responses,” said Bruce Klingner, a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. “It can be hoped that both leaders will adopt forward-looking strategic policies to focus on the shared China and North Korean threats, but past experience does not engender optimism.”

Statesmanship from both sides remains key to reversing the downward trend in bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo. “It has to be both of them exercising decisive leadership to do what is best for their countries and not what is political expedite for the personal politics or their political base,” said Col. David Maxwell, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

However, experts note that domestic concerns may take up more attention in both Seoul and Tokyo. Both face challenges in controlling the spread of the novel coronavirus and its economic aftereffects. “Domestic preoccupation is a defining characteristic of international relations at this time across the region,” said Mr. Snyder. “I think that there’s just less bandwidth for foreign affairs,” he added in a telephone interview.

Other experts caution that it is more realistic to have low expectations for the next stage of bilateral relations. “The problem we’ve gotten into in the past is each side often expects the other side to make more a concession than they’re willing to do,” said James Schoff, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “Then they get all upset because they think the other side should have done more.”

With such pessimism about the trajectory of Korea-Japan relations, what is to be done? “In my opinion, you do so by making an effort not to make things worse, and making an effort to try and put the relationship into a broader context,” said Mr. Schoff. While disagreements in certain areas may persist, “don’t sabotage the whole relationship, especially the economic piece, and the area of security cooperation.”

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